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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON DAY LABOURERS IN ELARDUS PARK PRETORIA

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ABSTRACT

On Barnard Street, Elardus Park in Pretoria one will see men standing, raising a finger or miming a skill to attract the attention of potential employers. It is also common to see men swarm around a car, pointing to themselves in an effort to get noticed and thus hired. This study deals with these people, who are day labourers leading a difficult life as they manage to survive in an entrepreneurial way. Their main need is to access work more easily. Skills training would make this possible. Social work could make a contribution in this respect.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Over the past few years Elardus Park, a suburb in Pretoria, has experienced an influx of people who come to look for work. This suburb is a middle- to upper-middle-class area with many houses and security villages under construction. Barnard Street, which runs next to the shopping complex, is where the job seekers stand, raising a finger or miming a skill to attract the attention of potential employers.

In 2001 the authors of this article (who are both lecturers in Social Work), the social worker and the minister of the local church in Elardus Park, who formed the research team, decided to determine what assistance the church and the social worker could provide to these seemingly unemployed and homeless people on the streets who are looking for work. Their concern was twofold:

- The men seemed to be unemployed as they were standing on the streets daily and they seemed homeless as some were sleeping in the open veld near Wolwespruit, a little river running close to Elardus Park;
- There was also a growing concern expressed by some residents of Elardus Park that the crime rate in the suburb was increasing drastically – to such an extent that the residents formed a home owners' association for protection. They were not sure whether these men were connected with the rising crime rate.

The metropolitan police frequently have “clean up” operations in the area in an attempt to get rid of the men, but a few days later the men are back. Actions like these do not have the desired effect.

The possibility of offering aid/relief to these men raised many questions, including the following:

- What aid, if any did they need and what would the effect of the aid/relief be?
- Would aid/relief not create an environment or context that would bring more people to the area?
- What assistance could be given that will benefit these men as well as the residents of the community?

As social workers the researchers realised that assistance entails more than providing aid or relief. Working from a people/person-centred approach the researchers realised that before they could decide on any plan of action, they needed to build relationships with their subjects, get to know them and find out about them, as action would be based on their perceptions. This article reports on the findings of the research.

Aims of the study

The aims of the study were an attempt to:

- get to know the men on the street/corners of Elardus Park in Pretoria to have a better understanding of the nature of their existence and experience of work and life and their aspirations;
- determine from the findings what assistance should be offered;
- determine possible stakeholders, resources, policies and actions;
- explore the possible role of social workers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research was an **qualitative, exploratory** study. In his articles Valenzuela (2000, 2001, 2002, 2003) mentions that research on day labourers until now has not moved beyond exploratory studies because, apart from his own research, very little research has been conducted on day labourers in and outside the United States of America. Valenzuela and Melendez (2003:193) mention that there is documentation (not research) on day labourers in the USA that dates back to 1700. At that time it had to do mainly with Irish men and women. The

men were working as cartmen and the women as domestic workers. According to some documentation, there were places in New York “where those seeking work could meet with those who wanted work” (Valenzuela & Melendez 2003:193).

As the researchers could not find any information on similar studies conducted in South Africa, this study is also of a qualitative and exploratory nature. To the best of the researchers’ knowledge this is the first study of its kind in South Africa.

The research took on many facets and phases, which are described below.

1. Literature study and finding the right terminology

The people are locally referred to as looking for a “piece job” or described as “piece jobbers” or “piece-job seekers”. Initially the researchers experienced problems in locating literature on the topic, because they did not know what terminology to use when they searched for literature. They realised that the term “piece job” might be a distinctly South African or even a regional term. After a lengthy search on the Internet the team came across the term “day labourers” as used by Valenzuela and collaborators, who are attached to the Centre for Urban Poverty at the University of California (UCLA) and the only people who researched this phenomenon. Despite very negative media coverage the researchers know very little about day labour work and up to now scholars have neglected to investigate this urban labour market (Valenzuela, 2002:5). The only research conducted outside of the USA was a study by Valenzuela, Kawachi and Marr (2003) on day labourers in Japan. The literature therefore revealed that day labourers are not just a South African phenomenon. According to Valenzuela (2002:6), in 1999 there were between 15 000 to 20 000 day labourers spread over 1000 hiring sites in the cities of Southern California. Apparently Los Angeles is home to the largest unauthorised immigrant population in the USA.

Day labourers are described as people who gather at an informal pick-up point, for example, a street corner, to sell their labour for the day, by the hour or for a particular job. According to Valenzuela (2002:7), any scientific study of day labourers, who are a highly mobile, highly visible, yet largely unknown population, requires creative research approaches. They are also difficult to research as, owing to their mobility, it is difficult to count and interview them.

2. The observation phase

For a few months the researchers spent Friday mornings walking the streets of Elardus Park to observe and meet with the people there. It was essential to be out early, as the day labourers stood around from 6:00 until 10:00 in the morning (it is the early bird who catches the worm!). Valuable information was collected, but the researchers soon realised that there was certain information that they could not access. The research team consisted of white people who could speak only Afrikaans and English, and the day labourers were all black males speaking African languages. Some of the men could hardly speak Afrikaans or English. This was already an indication that they were not from the urban areas – some of them came from as far afield as Mozambique and Zimbabwe and could not understand or speak English.

Five (5) fourth-level students in Social Work from Unisa who could speak an African language were then requested to assist with the research. The local church agreed to provide funds for their travelling expenses to and from Elardus Park.

3. The empirical research phase

This phase consisted of semi-structured interviews with 100 men conducted by the students mentioned above.

Owing to the mobility and the continuously changing number of the population, the sample consisted of those men who were available at any particular time over the six days that the students spent interviewing the men. By the time the students reached the streets, some of the men were already employed and therefore do not form part of the research. It may be that those already employed day labourers might have been the better and more skilful solicitors.

Another problem experienced during the research was that the men could not attend to the researchers for too long because this would jeopardise their opportunity of being employed. To overcome this obstacle of the people not participating in the research for fear that they would lose a job opportunity, Valenzuela (2000:337), offered the day labourers money for their participation. The researchers in this study did not have access to funds for this purpose.

Research results on the day labourers

Some of the information was clear and direct, but some of the unexpected information had to be ordered thematically.

1. Groups (social order)

If the day labourers are observed superficially, it may seem as if there is no particular social order among them and each one is there for himself. According to Valenzuela (2000:9), day labourers often seek each other for companionship, camaraderie, advice and favours. They share transport, housing and food. He also indicated that for the most part, however, social order is maintained and day labourers sustain a modicum of orderliness in their search for temporary work (Valenzuela, 2000:14).

In this research the following results emerged:

- The day labourers in Elardus Park seem to form groups and gather as groups at different points on Barnard Street from where they are picked up. It seems that a group claims a particular site. The group that reaches a site first on a particular day stands there. To have just one fixed pick-up point would increase competition and detract from their individual creative ways of attracting the attention of a potential employer.
- Every group in Elardus Park seemed to have a distinct profile. The men seem to group themselves according to their marital status or place of origin. On one particular corner there was, for example, the “Hammanskraal” group.
- The groups offer emotional, economic and social support which enables the individuals to survive; for example, they look after each other in times of illness and, so they say, will call the ambulance if someone is really ill. They will also inform his family. Comments they made included, for example:

“Out there life is not easy and you cannot survive on your own. We stay in groups and look after one another. If someone lacks food because he has not picked up a job, we share with him. Luck changes and we may be on the receiving end next time”.

2. Why Elardus Park?

The researchers wanted to know why they chose to come to Elardus Park?

The men indicated that the payment in this area was better than elsewhere. The wage they are prepared to work for ranges from R60-R80 per day, while in other areas people are not willing to pay this wage. This is in contrast with the foreigners (Mozambicans), who are prepared to work for as little as R20 a day.

“One of my friends told me about this place and he said I could make a lot of money. I’ve spent almost three years here, but have failed to get a well-paid job. You see, lady, there are too many of us here. Sometimes you can spend a day without any work”.

3. Length of stay in Elardus Park

Their stay in Elardus Park ranges from a few months to 15 years. Some men stay for a few months and then move to another area. One researcher was invited to see the “underground room” that a man had dug next to Wolwespruit. In this room he has a carpet, a battery-driven TV and pictures on the “wall”.

4. Gender

All the respondents in Elardus Park were male. In general, the women in Elardus Park seemed to get work as domestic workers more easily than men. As domestic workers they seem to function differently and access potential employment differently. Generally, the residents regard women as less of a threat than men. This is similar to the studies conducted by Valenzuela (2000) In their study, Valenzuela & Melendez (2003) found 5 percent of the day labourers in New York were women. They were hired for domestic work or factory jobs.

Valenzuela speculated that men may be jealous of the women having access to jobs more easily. He even hypothesised that this could be linked to increasing domestic violence.

5. Age

Table 1: Age of the respondents

Age	N	%
20- 30	51	51
31-40	39	39
41-50	9	9
51+	1	1
Total	100	100

The highest percentage of day labourers was between 20 and 30 years of age, followed by the age group 30-40. The ages may not always be accurate as students divided the age groups differently and some day labourers seemed evasive or unsure about their age. The ages coincide with the economically active years (see also Valenzuela in Cleeland, 1999).

6. Place of origin

Table 2: Place of origin

Place of origin	%
Tshwane/Pretoria	31
Gauteng (e.g. East Rand/Kempton Park)	5
Other provinces (Mpumalanga/Limpopo/North West/Free State)	52
Other countries (Mozambique/Zimbabwe)	12
Total	100

Most of the respondents are not local people. They are not from the metropolitan area of Tswane (Pretoria). Valenzuela's studies also indicated that only 1 percent of the day labourers in Los Angeles are from the USA. Others were from Mexico or Central America.

The foreign day labourers in Elarduspark did not have identity documents. This prevented them from obtaining employment in any other sector. Their only option was day labour.

7. Marital status

The majority of the men (55%) were unmarried, but they may have children or other dependants. Valenzuela and Melendez (2003) also found that 53 percent of the day labourers in New York were unmarried and that 47 percent were married or living with someone. It is interesting to note that the men also seemed to group themselves according to their marital status.

8. Family responsibility

All the men felt responsible for caring for their families (nuclear and extended family of origin). They mentioned that they were on the streets to support their families and to be responsible fathers and/or sons. They expressed the view that in some respects this way of life is better than staying at home, where their families are starving. They feel that at least they are trying to earn something. Most of the men maintained contact with their families, but felt that their relationships were under stress because of their inadequate income and the distance away from home. This makes it difficult to maintain contact. Some noted that, because they are not able to provide adequately, they felt they are looked down upon by their families. It is difficult for them to go home with very little. On the other hand, they felt that they were not "sitting on their hands", but are at least doing something. This provides them with a sense of responsibility and worth (see also Haines & Wood 2002:578).

Some related comments:

“My wife and I both had jobs. I lost my job. I told my wife to quit because, according to my culture, the woman cannot support her husband. With my income from piece jobs (day labour) we can at least buy food”.

Another man said that he had lost his job but that his wife is working in the Elarduspark area as a domestic worker.

“We don’t have financial difficulties at home, but a man can’t just sit around and depend on his wife’s income”.

For him doing day labour is a matter of honour.

“I am the first born and my parents were separated . My mother lost her job as domestic servant. I have to help raise my other four brothers through piece jobs”.

9. Educational status

Table 3 : Educational status

Educational qualification	%
No qualification to Grade 3	60
Grade 4-11	28
Grade 12 (matric)	12
Total	100

Sixty percent (60%) of these men have very low literacy levels and qualifications, which may contribute to the difficulty they have in finding a good job in formal employment. Valenzuela and Melendez (2003) found that in New York only 30 percent of the day labourers have over ten years of formal schooling and in Los Angeles Valenzuela (2000:11) found that more than half had less than 6 years of schooling.

Some respondents noted that the reason for their low level of schooling was that they were forced to leave school early to supplement family income. As a result of poverty at home they had often been without food and could not concentrate at school. They decided to leave home and find themselves a job. One respondent commented as follows:

“I’m the oldest of four children. I had to leave school in Grade 7 to find work to help my grandmother to support the family because my parents were unemployed”.

Some also shared the information that they had left home to avoid further physical violence and find their own place away from the violence at home.

Another said: *“I’ve been here for six years. I left school in Grade 9 after my girlfriend fell pregnant. I had to take responsibility for my actions”.*

10. Skills/jobs they are willing to do

The day labourers are mostly willing to do gardening, construction and maintenance jobs, for example, painting, tiling, roofing, bricklaying, driving, building and fixing swimming pools. These are all jobs with a high risk of occupational injuries.

Similarly, the day labourers in Los Angeles were looking for unskilled jobs. According to Valenzuela (2000) about 40 percent of the people who hire the day labourers are home owners and an equal percentage are subcontractors. Valenzuela found that 39 percent of the labourers work in construction, 29 percent paint and 28 percent do gardening.

11. Where do they live/sleep?

All the men interviewed have a place they refer to as home. Strictly speaking, none are homeless. Many live and sleep in the bushes at Wolwespruit:

“At night we cover ourselves with blankets and plastics”.

During the day they bury their possessions under the bushes. Sometimes these are stolen by the “tsotsis” or they are raided by the Tshwane metropolitan police. Some said that they live on construction sites or with wives or girlfriends who are “stay-in/sleep-in” domestic workers. Others sleep in any bush or shelter they can find.

12. Experiences of being a day labourer

Some of the men stated that they get work at least twice a week. Some even have “permanent” jobs some days of the week, for example, gardening jobs.

Some would prefer a stable permanent job and income, but there were those who preferred to be day labourers: “the pay is more and it is quick”. They are paid on a daily basis in cash and the work usually includes a lunch. When a lot of work is available, like in summer, they are able to earn more as day labourers as opposed to full time/permanently employed unskilled workers.

They also prefer the flexibility of their lifestyle. For example, when they have enough money, they can immediately go home, which would not be possible if they had a permanent job.

Some of them do not want to be registered as job-seekers. They want to be in charge of their own business and not dependent on another person to find them jobs. Another advantage for day labourers, according to Valenzuela (2000:18), is the opportunity to walk away from a job, especially if the job pays poorly, or it is dangerous, or if you do not like the job or the employer. They are not bound by any contract. Valenzuela quoted one of the day labourers as saying: “At least here you can negotiate your wages. If you are confident, you earn \$80, \$90, \$100 a day.” Valenzuela found that at some of the gathering sites the labourers set their own minimum wages, which are usually higher than they could earn if working permanently as an unskilled labourer.

The downside of day labour, according to the men in Elardus park, is their vulnerability to exploitation; for example, they were sometimes told that their work was not satisfactory and payment was not always negotiated when they were picked up. They described an incident where a person promised them jobs, but said that he needed to make photostats of their identity documents. He disappeared with all their documentation. This also illustrates their exposure to abuse and exploitation. Valenzuela and Melendez (2003) also asked the labourers if they are abused. The people complained about being paid less than the negotiated wage, being abandoned at the worksite, allowed no breaks for water, and having to deal with robbery and threats. The jobs they do are dependent on good weather and on rainy days and during winter time the work opportunities are limited.

13. Water and food

There were also times during the research where the researchers noticed that some of these men were really hungry. We sometimes bought bread for those who did not manage to get work for the day. The researchers wanted to know from the labourers where they got food and water. They said that the garage on Barnard Street in Elardus park allowed them to fetch clean drinking water. In Wolwespruit there were leaking water pipes that they used for washing themselves and their clothes.

It seems that 60 percent of them will have at least one meal a day. If they earn money on a particular day, they will buy food for the rest of the group. Food in this case means either bread or mealiepap (porridge made from corn). Those who managed to get gardening and maintenance work for the day would probably have received a meal from their employers. On Sundays some join the church groups that meet in the veld next to Wolwespruit. The researchers suspect that this is also a way of accessing food and mixing socially.

Some did, however, say that they also buy home-made beer to ease the hunger when they do not have money for food.

“When we don’t have food we just drink this home brew and go to sleep”.

This they buy from some of the women living with the men who earn money by brewing the beer.

They are sometimes given food by concerned residents. The residents’ good intentions, however, were experienced as degrading and disrespectful. They did not want to receive leftovers or “broken food”.

“We haven’t lost our minds yet. Until then we won’t take left-overs”.

They are also suspicious of “broken food”. They appreciate “whole food”, for example, a whole loaf of bread or unopened tinned food and drinks. “Broken food” may be poisoned. Their perception is that the foreigners are

willing to take any food to save their money. The local day labourers prefer to buy their own food. One of the residents we could talk to said: *"They are ungrateful. They throw the food I gave them in the dustbin."*

14. Daily activities

As indicated earlier in the article, the researchers observed that after 10:00 in the morning the men disappeared. We wanted to know from them what they do or where they go.

Some indicated that they spend their day sleeping in the bushes. Others will stay on the street corners playing gambling games like cards, or what they referred to as "lotto mochino", murabaraba", "mmielo", or casino. Others will spend the day doing domestic chores. They see this also as a way of hopefully earning money. One man asked one of the researchers hopefully: *"Madam if you give me R5, I will take it all in this game"*.

15. Their self-perception

The men perceive themselves as responsible people who want to support their families. Many families survive on the old-age pensions of parents and grandparents while the men are away looking for jobs. They feel hurt by the fact that the residents of Elarduspark view them as possible criminals.

In Los Angeles Valenzuela (2000) found that these unskilled people came to the US to make money and send it back home to support their families. They do not want to be perceived as bad and lazy people, but have good intentions.

16. Their perception of foreigners

The South African day labourers refer to the foreigners from Mozambique as *Makrikampas* and those from Zimbabwe as the *Makwerekweres*.

They make a very clear distinction between themselves and the foreigners. They have identity documents, which the foreigners do not have. There is suspicion and mistrust towards foreigners, especially the Mozambicans with whom they compete fiercely for jobs. According to them, the foreigners are willing to work for much less. They felt they are blamed for the crime in the community, while they regard the foreigners as the criminals. They believe that the foreigners can commit crimes and get away with them because they do not have identity documents and are therefore untraceable. They said they would like the government to deport all the foreigners so that more jobs would be available for South African citizens.

17. Their perceptions of the residents of Elardus Park

They perceive that the residents are willing to pay good wages and are in some ways really concerned about their well-being like those who offer them blankets and "whole food".

"We are grateful for that but what we really need is more opportunities to work for better salaries (wages)".

Some of the day labourers shared their observations and experience of the different cultural groups in Elardus Park.

About the **Afrikaans**-speaking people:

"Afrikaans- speaking people pay better than the Greeks and the Indians, but they are lazy. They pay well because they are too lazy to do it themselves".

About the **Greeks** and the **Indians**:

"They are greedy and stubborn".

About the **English**-speaking people:

"The English think they are clever and perfect. They expect good qualifications and tidiness."

The day labourers felt that the predominantly white community see them as powerless people who are dependent on them for survival. They provide them with soup and bread, but they would prefer jobs to be able to buy their own food. Some of the men think the whites want to poison them so that their streets will be clean.

18. The residents' perceptions of the day labourers

The researchers talked to available residents and shop owners who shared their views. What follows is a summary of the views of some residents, categorised by the researchers:

- Perceptions exist that these men are homeless and jobless;
- Shop owners stated that they had offered some of these men jobs. Their perception was that these men were

not interested in the jobs. This confirmed the men's preference for day labour as they could probably earn more, and were more flexible, independent and exposed to a greater variety of work;

- One shop owner said he actually felt protected by the day labourers presence as they are feared by "outsiders" coming into the community;
- Some residents seem to feel sorry for the men and feel hurt when their good intentions of giving food are not appreciated. On the other hand, the men regard their good intentions as disrespectful;
- Some residents were suspicious of them and suspected them of being criminals or of being informants for criminals and drug pushers;
- Hiring a day labourer is taking a risk. Employers risk hiring a worker who may have exaggerated his skills for the sake of securing work. During the research a resident pointed out that she had hired a day labourer who indicated that he knew how to transplant trees. After a few days she found a dead tree. On investigating, she realised that the labourer merely cut the tree at the bottom of the stem and transplanted it to the new hole! Prospective employers cannot verify the skills of these men. If they cannot do what is expected of them, no legal action can be taken. Employers can only withhold wages. Despite these drawbacks, there is a need and a market for day labourers and residents still employ them.

19. The needs expressed by the day labourers

The needs expressed by the day labourers included:

- more work opportunities;
- easier access to work opportunities, for example, if they can prove their skills;
- opportunities to work for better wages;
- to be respected like other people and specifically as men;
- an end to the harassment by the metropolitan police as they are not committing crimes;
- a labour office where they could register their qualifications (but not be controlled);
- marketing and advertising, for example, a central notice board in the community where they can market and advertise their skills;
- recognition of their skills, for example, letters of recommendation, certificates of competence to increase job opportunities;
- access to a fixed address, for example, an office to enable them to open bank accounts to bank their money, instead of keeping money on them and running the risk of having it stolen;
- basic accommodation to provide shelter and safety;
- a fixed pick-up point;
- access to or visits by a mobile clinic.

These needs were not mentioned by every day labourer but are a compilation of what they expressed. This aspect needs further research and exploration and verification.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This research was a preliminary study which only provides an overview of the position of day labourers in Elardus Park. From this study the following conclusions could be drawn:

- Day labourers seem to be a separate category in the labour market. There is a need for them and they provide a service (see also Valenzuela, 2002:6). There is a specific niche market for day labourers, which is to the benefit to the employers of the day labourers. The employers can hire a day labourer almost instantaneously to help with a household improvement job or repair activity. The day labourers are willing to do jobs that no one else will do. This is the important attraction for home owners as well as contractors. The employer does not have to deal with unions and the other problems that employers of permanent employees have, for example, taxes, medical schemes and wage disputes. According to Valenzuela (2002:6), the day labour market fulfils an important supply and demand function for the economy and for certain workforces, for example, subcontractors.
- From this research and the research by Valenzuela it is clear that day labourers are not only dependent survivalists, but they are also independent entrepreneurs. This interpretation, by Valenzuela, after his research explains some of the questions that arose during the research. For example, why did some of them not want to accept work offered to them by shop owners? Is this the reason why the church, when they wanted to register them, found only women willing and eager to be registered? Will they lose their group support and camaraderie if they move away? What excitement is included in bargaining for jobs on a daily basis? Is it similar to the excitement provided by the gambling games they play when they do not get a job?
- Taking the above into account, it seems as if facilitators from outside should not try to control these people's lives by feeding them and regulating them, but rather should facilitate processes to enable them to access work more easily and efficiently for the benefit of the labourer and the employer, e.g. skills development.

This does not detract from the fact that they are survivalists, they suffer and have a difficult life. Accessing work more easily and more often will make their lives easier and will enable them and their families to lead a more dignified life.

- Valenzuela (2001:41) also stated that this situation has no easy answers for policymakers struggling to balance the concerns of residents and business owners, as well as those of the day labourers. The problem will not go away as long as there is a market and a need for day labourers. To be able to formulate policies and planning there is a need to study not only the day labourers, but also the other stakeholders. According to Valenzuela (2003:11), this requires meticulous work, painstaking studies and careful data collection on the day labourers and, for example, the employers, residents, shop owners, etc. That is what is needed now for this market as well.
- The importance of local government became clear from this study. They are involved in all aspect of this issue as day labourers have a direct effect on residents, shop-owners and the environment where they gather. As social workers, we see the importance of social workers facilitating the processes of formulating policies and actions around day labourers on the local level, as they can function as the hub to bring together all stakeholders, such as the residents, shop-owners, police, community organisations, coupled with sustainable economic reconstruction to resolve this situation in a holistic fashion (Haines & Wood, 2000:580).

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